

Monday, Aug. 21, 1995

THE HILL IS RETAKEN BY SMOKERS

Time Magazine

By NINA BURLEIGH/WASHINGTON

When Democrats ran the house, the health and environment subcommittee office was a no-smoking preserve ruled by anti-tobacco crusader Representative Henry Waxman. Today the subcommittee is part of the domain of Republican Thomas Bliley Jr., a pipe lover who hails from the tobacco state of Virginia. Smoking is now accepted in the old subcommittee room, and congressional aides gleefully flick their ashes into a glass ashtray placed atop Waxman's picture.

Capitol Hill is the last best public place in America for smokers, a refuge where lighting up is countenanced as both a venerable tradition and an up-to-the-minute political statement about the evils of overregulation. The marble halls are decorated with sand-filled brass or ceramic urn ashtrays. Twin glass ashtrays on pedestals flank the entrance to the Senate. Smoking has always been allowed on the Senate side of the Capitol, and members have always smoked behind the railing on the House floor. But this session, smokers light up without shame in hallways and other public haunts. Smoke wafts around the curving stone staircases and perfumes the Rotunda. In the House members' restaurant, the menu touts cigars alongside bean soup.

Two years ago, smoking was going the way of snuff and chaw in Washington. Hillary Clinton outlawed it in the White House, forcing chastened inhalers onto the lawn. The Democratic House Speaker Thomas Foley prohibited smoking in public areas on the House side of the Capitol. A joke circulated on Capitol Hill that smoking was welcome only in the offices of the North Carolina congressional delegation.

But this smoke-free piety went out in January with the arrival of the new Republican majority. Some of the top men in the House leadership are avid tobacco users. House majority leader Dick Armey and Republican Conference chairman John Boehner puff cigarettes, and House majority whip Tom DeLay often sports a wad of tobacco inside his lower lip. In the 104th Congress, smoking defines the angry-white-male revolution. It is the congressional equivalent of Ronald Reagan reaching for the Clint Eastwood "make-my-day" mythology. They're not politicians; they're Marlboro Men.

Nonsmokers are in a huff. "That's what passes for wit among some Republicans," said Phil Schiliro, an aide to Waxman, referring to the placement of his boss's picture under the ashtray. "That epitomizes their philosophy: 'Those Democrats didn't know anything, and if they're against smoking we'll be for it and blow smoke in their faces.' " Senator Frank Lautenberg, who once successfully pushed to ban smoking in all facilities that receive federal funds and that serve children, now has to make his way to his Capitol Hill office past small groups of Republican aides lighting up with impunity in the hallway. To him, it's a partisan issue. "I can smell it," he says. "I don't think Republicans smoke any more than Democrats, but they defy the rules more than Democrats."

Although Speaker Newt Gingrich doesn't smoke, his press secretary Tony Blankley's cigarette habit is such that Blankley has been known to light up using the tiny flames under chafing dishes at early-morning press breakfasts. For Blankley, the relaxed smoking rules signify not a smelly sort of revenge, as Democrats view it, but a return to a more civilized era, redolent of Edwardian velvet jackets. "I'm hopeful that as a society we are returning to the habits of an earlier day when good manners ruled rather than dogma," he says. Antismoking rules are unnecessary, he believes, if "we use common sense and decency." Even President Clinton last week was unrepentant about puffing on "a handful" of cigars a year. Add that one to the list of Oval Office compromises for congressional Democrats to fume about.

--By Nina Burleigh/Washington